

Vesna Mikić

## THE FIRST AND THE LAST – ZDRAVKO ČOLIĆ – THE ‘GURU’ OF POP BALLAD

**Abstract:** The paper addresses the distinctive features of the pop ballad in the context of former Yugoslavia’s popular music. Zdravko Čolić’s long career, which ‘covers’ almost the complete history of popular music in ex-Yu space, was the ideal ballad repertoire to be surveyed. Since most of these ballads were written exclusively for the singer, insight into the author’s achievements in the domain of (Yugoslav) pop ballad is addressed, as well.

**Key words:** pop ballad, popular music, Zdravko Čolić, SFRJ, Kornelije Kovač, Goran Bregović, performativity of popular music.

The inversion of the title words of one of the ‘platinum’ hits<sup>1</sup> performed by Zdravko Čolić (1951), and the same message resulting from the inversion of the verses of the widely known ballad ‘You’re in my blood’,<sup>2</sup> best describes the position that Zdravko Čolić has obtained and still occupies in the history of this region’s popular music. Since he was the *first* and remained the *last* mega star of a country that in geo-political and historical terms does not exist any more, his career seems not only to be an excellent case study for historical research of SFRJ’s popular music, but also for examination of the phenomenon of the ‘prolonged’ life of this country in the area of popular music.<sup>3</sup> The examination of Čolić’s singing output allows us also to shed new light on creative works of numerous and, currently and historically, crucial songwriters, authors of lyrics and arrangers. Of course, as much as Čolić’s fame is staked upon the songs, the songs also gained from Čolić’s performances, the meaning he gave them, as well as the commercial success he enjoyed in Yugoslav popular music (circulation in the hundred-thousands, for instance).

---

<sup>1</sup> *Poslednji i prvi* [*The Last and the First*], Komuna/Kamarad, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> From the LP *Ti si mi u krvi* [*You’re in my Blood*], 1984, produced by Kamarad/Diskoton; K.Kovač-S.Kovač-K.Kovač. The lyrics in question: *Toliko dugih godina, uzimanja davanja, ostajem poslednji i prvi...* [*So many years of giving and taking, I stay the last and the first...*]

<sup>3</sup> Not only Čolić’s concert career repeatedly confirms this phenomenon, but also numerous singers and songwriters of younger (‘postwar’) generations from this region have had successful appearances throughout ex-Yu territory. We take this opportunity to pay homage to the recently deceased Toše Proeski, an excellent Macedonian singer who received warm welcomes in numerous cities of the former Yugoslavia.

One should be constantly aware of this kind of interactive relationship while contextualizing specific songs, editions or output, as well as in discussing popular music practices in general, since the performative aspect is a crucial component. Thus, the intention here is to try to outline that ‘two-way’ history that could be read from the thirty-year long career of Zdravko Čolić: the history of his performances and the way they have influenced certain songwriters, on the one hand, and on the other, the history of songwriters contributions in the field of popular music through their ‘inscribing’ into Čolić’s interpretations. Also, thanks to the longevity of Čolić’s career, as well as his rich performative capabilities, this discussion can focus on the genre of the ballad, being a constant in the singer’s career, which is to say a constant in popular music in the last few decades.

Due to my musical experiences as a teenager, I do not even recognize Zdravko Čolić as a ballad singer, which most certainly has something to do with the projection of my personal taste onto some of Zdravko Čolić’s choices in the realm of the ballad.<sup>4</sup> Still, a recent visit to the singer’s official website made me try, at least on this occasion, to change my attitude, for two reasons. The site promoted an on-going ballot for the best ballad in Zdravko Čolić’s repertoire,<sup>5</sup> featuring some seventy songs. Although the compilers of the song list were aware that a great number of the songs ‘were not quite total ballads’, they nonetheless included these in the selection. Hence, there were some songs that were not ballads, but that gained the ‘status’ of ballad – most probably in some ‘beyond generic’, evergreen meaning.<sup>6</sup> The first reason for my abovementioned and temporary attitude change was this ‘relaxed’ attitude to the genre, which probably stems from new times encouraging the loosening of strict definitions. The other reason was the tempting possibility of rethinking some (subjectively constructed) ‘stereotypes’ of Čolić’s singing.

One third of the more than 200 songs that Zdravko Čolić has recorded in the last three decades, judging by the above mentioned selection, belong to the ballad genre. Also, through insights into the singer’s biography, one can discover a special emphasis placed on some ballads in the descriptions of certain albums. The very existence of the ballad gives it a specific (usually affirmative) value, which further valorizes the singer’s achievement. In time, these qualifications emerge in descriptions - ‘first of all, great hit ballad’, ‘but, as the greatest hit there’s yet another

---

<sup>4</sup> Here I am primarily referring to the quite boring recent ballads in collaboration with Dino Merlin (Dino Dervišhalidović) that emerge from the so-called ‘Sarajevo school’ and have a specific audience, but mostly stay in the banal limits of the genre.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.zdravkocolic-cola.com/multimedia>, accessed 30.10.2007.

<sup>6</sup> ‘[...] not quite “total” ballads, but good, dear, old songs that we gladly sing when we’re in love...’, *ibid.*

ballad'<sup>7</sup> - so it is not surprising that Zdravko Čolić's marketing team came to the idea of organizing the vote for his best ballad. In addition, some of Zdravko Čolić's albums share their titles with the ballads (*Ti si mi u krvi*, 1984; *Da ti kažem šta mi je*, 1990; *Kad bi moja bila*, 1997). It could be argued that his 'specialization' was, in terms of longer career planning, intentionally led towards promoting him as a 'ballad performer', presumably because that genre allowed his undisputable singing ability to achieve its full potential, as it is primarily based upon 'narration', the intimate confession of the soloist, his singing/acting and performative capabilities. And, as already mentioned, Čolić has these in abundance: beginning with the range and timbre of his voice (high baritone-tenor), excellent intonation and diction that evolve from his acting talent, unusual flexibility, distinctive mannerisms in the phrase endings or transition interpretations (at first, in early years relatively shy, and later, developed to the level of solo improvisation, often in the manner of *sevdah* close to the ethno sound) to the effective and precise dynamic nuances according to the meaning of the lyrics, which also bring forth a variety of singing techniques (often between whisper and speech on the one side, and melismatic, coloratura additions on the other).

Čolić's history as a 'ballad performer' shows his early positioning in this realm, in his festival performances during the early 1970s, and the subsequent flourishing of his career. It could be possible, therefore, on some other occasion, to survey the road of popular music's and its authors' and performers' institutionalization in this region. In early 'festival' ballads (e.g., 'Ljubav je samo riječ' [Love is Just the Word] by Vojkan Borisavljević, 1973 and 'April u Beogradu' [April in Belgrade] by Kornelije Kovač, 1975) his singing potential was spotted and quite conveniently used (especially in the case of the latter song, to which we shall return). These ballads stay within the strict formal domain of the genre and conform to generic norms, musically (the sequel of instrumental, verse and chorus in app. 4 minute time) and in respect to lyrics (although they differ – Vuković's in 'Ljubav je samo riječ' are love lyrics of a general type that exceed an 'innocent' notion of love by introducing a corporeal dimension that was relatively bold for the time, while Kovač's lyrics are like a personal confession, provoked by the landscape). Thus, they do not overtly play on the card of Čolić's performative potentials or rest exclusively upon them.

Still, Kovač's song implied the future use of his performative capabilities, due to the technically demanding, 'enlightening' modulations (on the words 'the spring is once again in my soul'), and the ascending sequential motion of the repeated chorus. Also, the arrangements by

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Biographical data on the site were cited from *Yu Rock Enciklopedije* by Petar Janjatović.

Borisavljević and Kovač reflect the ‘zeitgeist’ in their combination of strings, piano solos, additional winds (preferably oboe) and female vocals, which simultaneously indicate that these choices were initiated by Čolić’s vocal characteristics.

These performances, together with some others, gained Čolić the popular music super-star status early in his career, thus making the songs produced exclusively for him a normal practice. So, provoked by his singing potential and image, numerous ballads were composed with the aim to further utilize these talents. In ballads such as ‘Bed Vine’, ‘One Winter with Christine’, ‘Podlugovi Station’, ‘Your Eyes’, ‘You’re in My Blood’, ‘If You Were Mine’, ‘Night Owes You to Me’, ‘Just When You Say Love’, ‘Nobody’s and Everybody’s’, created from 1975 till 2006, we can follow the already described diversity of Čolić’s interpretative capabilities, often conditioned by songwriters’ ambitions and preferences. In the hopes of defining this diversity, we met composers of various generations and popular music genres who, by participating in the construction of Čolić as a ballad master, and thanks to him, additionally constructed their own distinctive poetics. By far the most important collaboration is that between Čolić and Kornelije Bata Kovač, as from the moment Kovač invited Čolić to join his *Korni group*, Čolić’s singing career began in earnest; although, as it would turn out, the solo path was his true destiny. Despite Čolić’s early split from the band, he and Kovač continued working together, establishing one of the longest and most fruitful creative partnerships in the history of Yugoslav popular music. Namely, Kovač would be the songwriter, arranger and producer of the majority of Čolić’s releases.<sup>8</sup>

Kovač was already fully aware of Čolić’s capacities in the song ‘April in Belgrade’, and so continued to push them further in the ballads written over a span of almost thirty years, occasionally utilizing large narrative forms in one period of his work with *Korni group*, but with the unmistakable communicative ‘lead’ embodied in Čolić. Thus, among the more memorable ballads we find ‘One Winter with Christine’ from 1978, ‘Podlugovi Station’ of 1983 and ‘You’re in my Blood’ of 1984. Since Kovač wrote the music and lyrics for the first two, his preference for the ‘confessional’ ballad, placed into a colorful landscape, comes here to its full expression. In the case of the third song, the lyrics of which were penned by Kovač’s wife, Spomenka, we find ourselves in the realm of intimate confession, emphasizing bodily and psychological sensations.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ti i ja* [You and Me], 1975; *Ako prideš bliže* [If You Get Closer], 1978; *Zbog tebe* [Because of You], 1980; *Mal pojačaj radio* [Turn a Radio a bit On], 1981; *Šta mi radiš* [What You do to Me], 1983; *Ti si mi u krvi* [You’re in my Blood], 1984; *Zdravko Čolić*, 1988; *Da ti kažem šta mi je* [Let me Say What’s Wrong With Me], 1990; *Kad bi moja bila* [If You Were Mine], 1997; *Okano*, 2000; *Čarolija* [Magic], 2003.

‘One Winter with Christine’ exceeds the scope of the genre both formally, with its developed chorus repetitions and duration (over five minutes in length), and thematically, by introducing Christine’s character (represented by the soloist) in the chorus. Thanks to these interventions, based upon Čolić’s abilities, Kovač almost steps from love lyricism into epics, similar to his numerous symphonic-pop *Korni* epics, the breadth of which, in duration as well as sound, successfully depicts the vastness and whiteness of Vojvodina’s winter landscape. But Čolić narrows the focus of that landscape moving from the sadly chanted narration of the verse, through Christine’s character in the chorus that by repetition, graduated texture, acceleration, and the change in the melody between the syllable ‘na’ and lyrics ‘Good evening to you, my friends’ concentrates more on the two lovers ‘outside, in the courtyard’, to culminate finally in Čolić reciting the verses directly to Christine. New repetition of the chorus widens the focus in the ballad’s dramaturgy and gradual distancing from the lovers, merry company at the grange, narrator and, finally, memory as such. Any further confirmation of the number of roles Čolić performed in this song, as well as of the fact that Kovač needed Čolić to ensure the song would be a great hit, are unnecessary.

Although ‘Podlugovi Station’ is also a great hit, this song, in the sense of musical shaping, conforms to the ballad genre, with a recognizable instrumental introduction (tone painting of snowflakes?), and verse/chorus exchange in which Čolić in ‘narrative-confessional’ manner once again recalls the thrills of love. While ‘One Winter With Christine’ points to possible redefinitions of the genre in terms of the ‘dramatic scene’ and formal structure of the ballad, based on the sections of different characters and tempi (primarily combinations of slow and faster, dance-like sections) that can be traced throughout Čolić’s repertoire, ‘Podlugovi Station’ is a real ‘sentiš’ of the 1908s (back then known as ‘stiskavac’), or, music to be danced to in pairs at parties.

Besides differences in the lyrics, ‘You’re in my Blood’ conforms to Kovač’s standard ballads written for Čolić: after a sad introduction in the piano’s descant register, a relatively calm narrative and sequential verse develops, that presents Čolić’s range in the best possible way, and culminates in a dramatic chorus charged with symphonic sound above which Čolić’s powerful vocal line stands out.

Hence, Kovač’s creative instinct developed Čolić’s ‘operatic’ potential. At the same time, with the help of Čolić, Kovač managed to present his creative goals to wider audiences. The same symbiotic creative relationship worked for another man who would soon become one of Yugoslav’s popular music icons, Goran Bregović. Furthermore, Bregović and Kovač formed the creative team

for Čolić's LP recording *Turn a radio a bit on* (1981) and frequently met on Čolić's different projects in combinations such as composer-lyricist, or composer-lyricist-arranger-producer, until the CD *Magic* of 2003. Besides the fact that the Sarajevo 'connections' of the three musicians were in question, it is obvious that Bregović was aware, at least as much as Kovač, of Čolić's abilities and charisma.

Let us look more closely at one of the ballads, created just before Bregović's breakthrough, which, if not being exclusively Čolić's trademark, most certainly is Bregović's. The song in question is 'Bad Vine' of 1975, with lyrics by Arsen Dedić, and music and arrangement by Goran Bregović. At least some of Bregović's procedures in the song would become typical of the ballads of *Bijelo Dugme*, the most popular ex-Yu rock band, in more recent years. With no instrumental introduction, the voice begins the song with the discrete accompaniment of the acoustic guitar and synthesized sounds, speaking directly to the loved one. After the repeated verse unfolds a somewhat 'lighter' chorus thanks to the higher melody and arrangement, followed by the abrupt 'fall' into the darkness of the verse repetition with which this unusually short ballad ends. Thus, as opposed to Kovač, Bregović aims at direct speech with no previous confession or introduction in the subject, and with few words, and even fewer music changes, he effectively reaches his goal. Certainly, Dedić's verses call for the 'identification' of the performer and listener, because they are based on direct speech and are completely intimate. This is the path that Bregović proceeded to follow in his own ballads written for *Bijelo Dugme*.

Although Bregović would write a number of songs for Čolić, we shall survey just one more. Čolić rarely sings 'If You Were Mine' of 1997 at huge venues, and certainly not because he cannot sing it live, but rather because his audience cannot 'follow' him. In 'If You Were Mine', we again see Čolić the singer, the actor, the convincing interpreter of lyrics by Bregović, Andrijana, and Marina Tucaković, and the great dramatic singer. His performance, not entirely unlike 'operatic monologue' and with all the virtues and faults of the great opera arias, promotes all of the admirable aspects of Čolić. An unobtrusive arrangement by Slobodan Marković, with the excellent combination of solo piano accompaniment, gradually enhanced by strings, and a few wind solos, immerses us deeper into Čolić's colorful world. And, if this song is listened to in this way, with the knowledge of Čolić's previous achievements, then it could be said that in it, Čolić for his own soul and from it, and 'separating his soul from his body', reached the climax of his artistic endeavor. Obviously, fully aware of this, he entitled the completed CD after this song.

In the manner of great performers, Čolić ‘adapted’ his nature to the authors. As in the case of ‘Bad Vine’, we can ‘read’ the elements of yet another important creative poetic of Yugoslav popular music in another of Čolić’s ballads of the early 1980’s. ‘Your eyes’ (1983) is Momčilo Bajagić – Bajaga’s ‘inscription’ in the output of Zdravko Čolić, bearing the marks of Bajaga’s mature pop-rock ballad style. Apart from the very simple melodic lines and harmonies of the verses and chorus, typical of this rocker’s songs, Bajaga is as always charming in his lyricists’ mannerisms. As in the case of the cult ballads written for the performance of Bora Đorđević and *Riblja Čorba*, and for himself and his *Instruktori*, Bajaga’s lyrics in ‘Your Eyes’ are characteristic of his work with their free associations and ‘fruity’ comparisons. ‘Your eyes, as mature plums are falling on me’ are similar to the ‘pale, cinnamon colored stain’ (of the song ‘When You Walk’, 1984) or to the ‘trampled cherries’ (‘Kiss me’, 1984). Of course, there are whimsical language twists, such as ‘when you’re sleeping, I cannot help thinking of what you’re dreaming, I can not help thinking of what you’re thinking, when you’re sleeping’. Čolić’s perfect diction successfully emphasizes these traits.

In his recent albums, Čolić presents himself, as has been already pointed out, as a composer, employing the already tested procedures of his predecessors. His ballads now reflect contemporary ethno-sound trends that are not foreign to Čolić (or to Kovač or Bregović, for that matter). In respect to the performance, these elements contribute to yet another dimension of interpretation influencing the specific ‘expansion’ of the melismatic and coloratura elements, quasi improvisatory moments, as well as passionate, quasi-oriental sensual melodic lines of the wide melodic range, as in ‘Night Owes You to Me’. Here Čolić, coming from a barely audible whisper with chordal accompaniment on acoustic guitar and simulated zither, enters into the dramaturgically cascade-like second/transitional verse of the song, to finally ‘sing out’ in the chorus, which is a fuller arrangement of the rhythmical pulse of the first verse, thus successfully depicting the picture of (Balkan?) love ‘drunkenness’.

Đorđe Balašević, Čolić’s collaborator in lyrics for years, joins the list of ballad authors for Čolić in his more recent albums. And, as the others before him, he ‘inscribes’ his specific songwriter style onto Čolić’s performance style. By the expanded (Panonnian) ballad ‘God, save me from her Love’, Balašević realizes a mini theatrical scene typical of his work, with relatively simple melodies, simple formal logic and unimpressive instrumentation, playing, as usual, on the strength of the lyrics. With other of Balašević’s lyrics, in the hymn-like musical manner of Kornelije Kovač, Čolić maybe for the first time in his career, steps out ‘autobiographically’, by asking ‘Am I

Nobody's or Everybody's?'<sup>9</sup> Zdravko Čolić as the performer of ballads by important songwriters, and songwriters as creators of Čolić's ballads, together and in the best sense became 'nobody's and everybody's', in the way in which popular culture consumers' practices strongly, inevitably and constantly constitute our lives.

\*\*\*

If I were to vote for the best ballad interpreted by Zdravko Čolić, voting for more than one song being possible, and in accordance with the described 'diversity' of choices, my favorite would be the song 'Zločin i kazna' [Crime and Punishment], one of the 'Russian' ballads from *Okano* (Oleg Gusmanov / Đorđe Balašević / Kornelije Kovač) that steps beyond the ballad genre thanks to its 'danceable' chorus. The 'Russian' sequence of the slow verses, excellent bass line of the chorus and Kovač's brilliant keyboards, with Čolić's fascinating balance between contrasting moods ranging from sadness to rage, and his dynamic and register nuances, make this song my favorite and a possible model for a redefined, contemporary version of the pop ballad.

Translated by the author

## Summary

In more than thirty years long career Zdravko Čolić have succeeded to become and remain the biggest star of popular music in ex-Yu terms. Since he could be regarded as the first and last star of the country that doesn't exist any more, his career could serve as a platform for various interpretations of ex-Yu popular music. Bearing in mind his excellent singing and acting potentials, and the wide variety of songs, i.e. song writers that were engaged in making his songs, in the thirty year span, one could also deal with kind of creative history in former Yugoslavia's popular music. Thus, in telling Zdravko Čolić's story, focusing on his performances of pop ballads, we're actually telling the story of popular music of this region, aware of crucial connections of creative and performative aspects of popular music.

---

<sup>9</sup> „Ničiji i svačiji“ (Nobody's and Everybody's), Čolić/Kovač-Balašević, *Čarolija*, 2003.